

# HOW THE VAMPIRES CROSSED

## *The Story of the First Transatlantic Flight by Jet Aircraft*

**W**HILE the six D.H. Vampires of No. 54 Squadron were engaged on the first transatlantic flight by jet-propelled aircraft news of their progress was scanty and often contradictory. Since their arrival in Canada, however, the following account of their achievement has been received from Mr. Thomas Cochrane, Deputy Information Officer, Air Ministry, who flew in one of the accompanying Yorks. It is date-lined "Goose Bay, Labrador, 15th July, 1948," and conveys a vivid impression of the difficulties encountered and the manner in which they were tackled. The account reads:—

In the last light of day, with squalls of rain driving along Goose Bay airfield, Labrador, the first crossing of the Atlantic by jet aircraft was completed at 9.25 p.m. local time (12.25 a.m. G.M.T.) on Wednesday, July 14, when six Vampires of No. 54 Squadron landed at this Canadian base. Within a short time the whole force had arrived and the ferrying of a jet squadron across the Atlantic with its ground crews and equipment had been proved a feasible proposition.

The Vampires left Stornoway in the Hebrides at 10.15 a.m. G.M.T. on Monday, July 12, and covered the 2,202 miles of ocean crossing in a flying time of 8 hrs. 18 mins. The flying times on each of the three legs of the journey were: Stornoway to Meek's Field, Iceland (662 statute miles), 2 hrs. 42 min.; Iceland to Bluie West 1, Greenland (757 miles), 2 hrs. 41 min.; Greenland to Goose Bay, Labrador (783 miles), 2 hrs. 55 mins. All cruising was done at heights between 25,000 and 32,000 ft. along tracks in the upper air which have been little charted anywhere, and over the Atlantic hardly at all. At this height the jet air liners of tomorrow will possibly travel, and the experience gained by this military operation will not be without its value to civil operators of the future.

Ferocious headwinds, estimated at 207 m.p.h., weather fronts extending up to 35,000 to 40,000 ft., sudden fogs sweeping over mountain-locked fiords, are some of the factors which confronted the Force Commander, Wing Commander D. S. Wilson-MacDonald, when sizing up the situation during the period before he was able to give the word "Go."

### **"In the Teeth of the Weather"**

The Force had to carry out this operation against the prevailing winds of the North Atlantic, a characteristic of the weather which is emphasized, indeed exaggerated, at the heights that jets must accept if there is need to extend to anything approaching maximum range. On each leg of this journey the Vampires required favourable conditions as to visibility at point of departure and arrival, and above all in regard to the speed and direction of the wind between 25,000 and 30,000 ft. The winds remained perversely unfavourable for eleven days and then suddenly moderated and gave three days in which the Vampires shot through virtually in the teeth of the weather. The Vampires covered the last two legs—both longer and more difficult than the first—in one day, and in doing so accepted conditions at both points of arrival that were by no means ideal. They left Iceland at lunchtime and were in Canada in time for supper.

On the leg between Iceland and Greenland the jets ran into cirrus cloud at 25,000 ft. S/L. R. Oxspring led his Vampires under it, but he found himself down at a height of less than 23,000 ft., and there was nothing for it but to go up through the cloud and continue the flight at 32,000 ft. The fact that the jets flew in formation in two flights of three did not make flying through cloud over agreeable, and it says a great deal for the quality of the squadron's training that they kept formation through the innumerable awkward patches of cloud with which they met. The pilots were able to see the coast of Greenland when they were 240 miles

away, and could appreciate the vast immensity of the ice-cap over which their track lay.

At Bluie West, S/L. H. B. (Micky) Martin had returned from a weather reconnaissance at this juncture to be warned from the rescue launch half-way down the steep fiord, which leads up to this mountain-locked airfield from the south, that cloud was coming down and moving in towards the base. Unfortunately, one of the engines of S/L. Martin's Mosquito PR34 was found to be temporarily unserviceable, but the York freighter which was also at Bluie West with the advance fuelling party came to the rescue. Piloted by F/L. Dudley Scorgie, one of the three V.I.P. York captains from No. 24 Squadron, Transport Command, with the Force, the freighter, with S/L. Martin working the radio-telephone, took up its position at 8,000 ft. above the edge of the ice cap at the point over which the Vampires would have to come in to get into the airfield if the cloud came far enough up the fiord to cover the airfield. From this direction the approach into Bluie West is down the path of a huge glacier between sheer walls of rock. The "safe" approach to Bluie West is up the 50-mile fiord which is less than half-a-mile wide at points. With the cloud down over the fiord there is no alternative but to come down from over the 7,000 ft. ice-cap.

### **A York "Lighthouse"**

S/L. Martin made several anxious calls over the R/T. to "Mosquito 620 or any Vampire" before the faint call came over the earphones that the escorting Mosquito was "reading" from the York. The Vampires were given the York's position, and between the two layers of cloud which lay east of the airfield the navigator of the York fired off Very cartridges as markers for the approaching jets. Through a gap in the clouds those in the York saw for a moment six evenly spaced lines of vapour trails as the jets came on straight over the ice-cap. The York called up to S/L. Oxspring when he was directly overhead, and at the same time the squadron commander picked out the airfield and lost no time in leading the formation down to the single sloping runway of what must be one of the most difficult situated airfields in the world.

The advancing cloud kept off a mile or so down the fiord and as strong earlier winds between Greenland and Labrador had abated the decision was made to go on; five hours after arrival the Vampires were again airborne, and heading west. The forecaster had given a weather front en route stretching up to 15,000 ft. When it was encountered at about the point of no return the squadron found the clouds piled up to well beyond 30,000 ft. For a short time course was changed and varying heights tried before the formation could settle down to level progress at 32,000 ft. Conditions at Goose Bay were not pleasant as the Vampires circled down, but the light was fading and no time was lost settling down on to the wide runway.

The transatlantic crossing was shared by all nine pilots from No. 54 Squadron who had been allotted to the Force. They were divided into three sections: Blue: S/L. Oxspring, F/L. H. W. Wright and Plt. I. I. S. Evans; Red: F/L. F. G. Woolley, Plt. I. W. G. Wood and Plt. II. R. J. Skinner; and Black: S/L. N. H. Courtney, F/L. C. I. Colquhoun and F/L. N. W. Heale. The Stornoway-Iceland first leg was flown by Blue and Red sections; Iceland-Greenland by Blue and Black, and Greenland-Labrador by Red and Black. Thus each pilot did two legs of the transatlantic crossing.

At Goose Bay the squadron was given a great reception by the R.C.A.F. Also there to meet them was Colonel Dave Schilling, one of the U.S. Air Force's greatest fighter pilots, who was waiting to take off with sixteen Shooting Stars on the reverse of the route the Vampires had just covered.